

HUBERT WOLANIN
Jagiellonian University in Krakow
hubert.wolanin@uj.edu.pl

ON THE (IM)POSSIBLE LATIN ETYMONS OF POLISH *JARMUŁKA* ('YARMULKE, SKULLCAP')

Keywords: *jarmułka*/yarmulke, etymology, Latin, *almucium*

Abstract

The etymology of the Polish word *jarmułka* has become a subject of discussion in *LingVaria* (1.15: 113–124). Catalyst for the discussion was a paper written by B.A. Struminsky (1987), in which the author puts forward a thesis concerning the Latin origin of the word. The present paper constitutes a commentary in which the lexical status of the Latin word forms suggested as potential etymons of *jarmułka*, both in Struminsky's paper and in the other works concerning the subject, published in the issue of *LingVaria* mentioned above, is interpreted from a Latinist's perspective. Moreover, reference is also made to a paper by W.G. Plaut (1955), in which the author postulated the Latin etymology of *jarmułka* 30 years prior to the work of Struminsky.

This year's *LingVaria*, a half-yearly periodical, contains some interesting papers concerning the etymology of the Polish word *jarmułka* ('yarmulke, skullcap'). The incentive behind it was the paper by B.A. Struminsky entitled „On the etymology of Polish *jarmułka*,” published in 1987 in the *Jewish Language Review* 7 (200–201), together with comments by D.L. Gold, editor-in-chief of the periodical (Gold 1987). Due to the fact that this publication failed to generate the expected discussion concerning the origin of the Polish *jarmułka*, a decision was made that both texts should be reprinted in *LingVaria* (1.15: 115–118), a periodical which is more accessible to Polonists and Slavicists. These were supplemented with an introduction by D.L. Gold (Gold 2013) and a paper by M. Stachowski entitled “Uwagi o *jarmułce*” (“Comments on *jarmułka*”, Stachowski 2013) that presented the view of a Turkologist, since a crucial element of the initial paper by B.A. Struminsky was a thesis that, contrary to widespread

opinion, the genesis of the word *jarmulka* should be looked for not in the Turkish (Turkic) lexis, but in Latin one. As well as D.L. Gold, M. Stachowski, too, referred to Latin words as possible etymons of *jarmulka*, at the same time signalling the need for them to be verified by other specialists. In response to M. Stachowski's appeal, as a Latinist rather than an etymologist, I intend to comment on the lexical status of the Latin word forms discussed in the works mentioned above in the context of their likelihood of being a source of *jarmulka*.

When considering its attestation in a 15th c. document from Germany, B.A. Struminsky assumes that a medieval Latin word *almunicum* 'canon's cap' is the etymon of the oldest forms of the word in question, which in 15th c. Polish sources was written as *jalmurky* and *yelmnvcha*. On the other hand, he derives the (parallel) variants *jalmurka* and *jarmulka* (through intermediate stages: *jarmurka* < **jarmucka*) from the Latin form *armutia* 'long cap worn by the clergy,' recorded in files from the 1314 synod of Ravenna. He claims that according to Du Cange's dictionary (1840) both word forms, i.e. *almunicum* and *armutia*, constitute variants of the base lexeme *almucium*.

While also stressing the need to verify the relevant Latin terms, D.L. Gold for his part indicates yet another medieval Latin word, i.e. *almutia* 'cowl, hood', as a derivative of the Arabic *al-mustaka* 'fur-lined cloak with long sleeves,' which would suggest an Oriental (although not Turkic) provenience for *jarmulka*, with a Latin transmission. M. Stachowski, in turn, recognises Gold's conjecture to be plausible, in conclusion, however, he refers to B.A. Struminsky's suggestion and states that a Latin term "of the *almunicum* or *almunica* type (pluralis or femininum under the influence of the *almucia~armutia*)" is a probable source of *jarmulka*.

With reference to the Latin lexemes discussed above one needs in the first place to state that the word *almunicum*, noted by B.A. Struminsky and quoted by the two other scholars, is not attested in such a form in medieval Latin. However, it would be possible to surmise that in this instance the reference is rather to the word *almunicium*, recorded in a 1447 document and provided in Du Cange's dictionary (1840) with a cross-reference to the entry *almucium*; as a result, the lexeme *almunica*, whose possible existence was considered by M. Stachowski, is also not attested. On the other hand, both of the other word forms, i.e. *armutia* indicated in Struminsky's text and *almutia* suggested by D.L. Gold, have attestations in medieval texts quoted in Du Cange's dictionary (1840), and not only the former, but also the latter is classified in the dictionary as a variant of the base lexeme *almucium*, which was to mean a short cape covering the head and arms used by monastic and diocesan clergy as well as lay persons. Moreover, this lexeme, still in the same dictionary, is also ascribed other variant forms, i.e. *almutium*, *almucia*, *aumucia*, *almussa*, *amussa*, that are attested in medieval documents. Słownik (1953–, vol. 1, fasc. 3, s.v. *almucium*) registers also the variants *almatium* and *almiccium*. It is worth emphasising, however, that oppositional pairs of the *almucium/almutium* or *almucia/almutia* type should be treated as purely orthographic, and not phonetic, variants, as in the period between the 3rd and 5th c. AD, as a result of the consonantalising of the originally vocalic /i/ in the pre-vocalic position, both the preceding stop /k/ (written with the help of the letter c) and /t/ were palatalised and assimilated to the dental affricate /c/ (/tʃ /). Evidence of

this is seen in the inscription spelling of the *VINCENTZVS* (= *Vincentius*) type (3rd c. AD), as well as in the later numerous mistakes on epigraphic relics and in manuscripts, in which *-ci-* was used in place of *-ti-*, and *vice versa*, e.g. *terciae* (= *tertiae*), *definiciones* (= *definitiones*), *conditio* (= *condicio* 'contract, condition'), *condicio* (= *conditio* 'spicing of dishes'). In medieval Latin an orthographic variation of this type, i.e. an alternative spelling of the interchangeable *-ti-/ci-*, is quite common (cf. e.g. Słownik 1953-, vol. 8, fasc. 8, s. v. *simulatio* / *simulacio*, *solacium* / *solatium*, etc.).

With regard to the discussion in *LingVaria* it is perhaps also worth noting one more fact. In his 1987 commentary on B.A. Struminsky's paper D.L. Gold states in passing (1987: 203) that as regards a possible etymon of *jarmulka* Plaut mentions the form *almucia*, that is another of the variants mentioned above of the word *almucium*, one, however, which differs from that noted by himself (i.e. *almutia*), as well as from that noted by B.A. Struminsky (i.e. *armutia*). Although D.L. Gold does not refer to any specific publication, undoubtedly he must have had in mind W.G. Plaut's paper (1955). In that work W.G. Plaut does indeed indicate the form *almucia*, or its diminutive derivatives: *almucella/armucella*, as potential roots of *jarmulka*. Due to the absence of W.G. Plaut's paper in the *LingVaria*'s "jarmulka album" I will quote the final fragment that begins with a question related to an earlier section, in which the author casts doubts on earlier attempts to clarify the origin of *jarmulka* on the grounds that they failed to take the religious nature of the headgear into consideration. Thus, he asks (and answers):

What was the comparable church garment which the Jewish cap resembled, without, of course, duplicating it? It was the *amice* (or *almuce*), a cape which covered the shoulder and which was worn by the priest until he arrived at the altar. [...] It appears most likely that in later days it gave rise to a Jewish word – our *yarmulke*.

The Latin word for *amice* (or *almuce*) was *almucia*. Most scholars agree that the German *Mütze* is derived from *almucia* or its related forms *aumucia*, *armutia*. [...] The word *almucia* had a diminutive form *almucella* or *armucella*. It should be born in mind that the Latin pronunciation of the 'c' varied considerably, and was quite often consistently pronounced as a 'k'. It is suggested, therefore, that 'the small amice', or *armucella*, gave rise to the use of the word *yarmulke*. The transposition of the 'l' and 'c' is a common phenomenon in linguistic derivation. It appears plausible to assume that *almucia* was an often-used term in medieval Germany; hence its adoption into everyday language, taking later the form of *Mütze*. This same process then gave rise also to calling the small Jewish cap by this term; and the Jews who took their medieval German with them to Eastern lands probably also took the word *armucella* along. With them it travelled as far east as Turkey; and we suggest that the Osman term came from the West – either through the mediation of the Jews, or more directly in some similar way. It is entirely possible that the ultimate adoption of the word in its present popular form was hastened by a re-inoculation from Slavic or other languages; and it is equally possible that the word *yarmulke* came into prominence amongst the Jews because their neighbours used it to describe the Jewish cap.

To sum up: in our opinion all previous explanations fail to establish the connection between the term and the specific Jewish and religious use of the cap. We suggest that the religious headgear of the clergy, called *almucia* (or *armucella*), which

gave rise to the German *Mütze*, the Portuguese *mursa*, and the Scotch *muth*, also was the source for the Jewish *yarmulke*, the Slavic *yermolka* and probably also the Osman *yarmuluk*.

I will add two comments with reference to the Plaut's text. The first concerns the diminutive form of the word *almucia* adduced by W.G. Plaut, i.e. *almucella* or *armucella*. In the related footnote the author refers to the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1885, vol. 6, 2839, s.v. "Mütze"), however, this dictionary only mentions the form *almucella*. Similarly, Du Cange's dictionary (1840) quotes the diminutive *almucella*, as well as *almuzella* and *aumucella*, yet it does not record the form *armucella*. The second comment is connected with the suggestion that in the form *armucella/almucella* the letter *c* could stand for the phoneme /k/. This, however, seems rather unlikely, due to the fact that the previously-mentioned assibilation to the dental affricate /c/ around 4–5th c. AD also covered /k/ when placed before the front vowel /e/. This is even testified in the articulation of Romance words constituting continuations of words such as, e.g. *centum* 'a hundred,' with a dental or alveolar fricative/affricate (and not velar) in the word onset.

In the recently initiated discussion concerning the etymology of *jarmulka* it is worth remembering, however, that the root of this word was situated in medieval Latin over 30 years before the publication of B.A. Struminsky's paper, which has become the reason for the present discussion.

References

- Du Cange 1840 = du Fresne C. 1840. *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*. [vol. 1]. Paris.
 Słownik 1953– = 1953–. *Słownik łaciny średniowiecznej w Polsce*. Kraków.
- Gold D.L. 1987. Comment by D.L.G. – *Jewish Language Review* 7: 202–203.
- Gold D.L. 2013. Wprowadzenie do dyskusji o pochodzeniu polskiego *jarmulka* i jego etymologicznych odpowiedników w innych językach słowiańskich. – *LingVaria* 1.15: 113–114.
- Grimm J., Grimm W. 1885. *Deutsches Wörterbuch*. Leipzig.
- Plaut W.G. 1955. The origin of the word *yarmulke*. – *Hebrew Union College Annual* 26: 567–570.
 [repr. in: *Eight decades: The selected writings of W. Gunther Plaut*. Toronto 2008: 101–104].
- Stachowski M. 2013. Uwagi o *jarmulce*. – *LingVaria* 1.15: 119–124.
- Struminsky B.A. 1987. On the etymology of Polish *jarmulka*. – *Jewish Language Review* 7: 200–201.
 [repr. in: *LingVaria* 1.15: 115–117].